

U.S. feels vindicated by Hanoi's low flooding

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Washington — Administration officials who two months ago were fearful that natural flooding in North Vietnam late this summer would lend substance to Hanoi's claims that the United States is deliberately bombing North Vietnam's dike system are breathing easier. In separate interviews in recent days, government officials with access to intelligence reports of flood conditions in the Red River Delta have confirmed that the flood crest, which annually reaches its high point in late August, is lower than usual and is well below last year's record levels. "We're beginning to think they'll make it through this year," one official said. "Last year at this time they were treading water."

Recent Air Force photo-reconnaissance of the Red River Delta south and east of Hanoi has revealed only two instances of minor flooding, according to government sources.

Neither instance has been reported by Hanoi radio, which is monitored extensively by U.S. intelligence and which, through much of the summer, has kept up a drum fire of charges that American bombing of North Vietnam has deliberately targeted the dike system.

The key to flood control in the Red River Delta is whether or not the annual runoff from melting snows in the Himalayas, which find their way to the Red River's sources in the Yunnan Plateau in southwest China, threaten to overpower North Vietnam's 2,700-mile system of levees.

Produced a disaster

Many of the dikes are 30 or 40 feet higher than the surrounding terrain they protect.

By late August last year, an abnormally high runoff had combined with heavy rainfall from typhoons in the Yunnan Plateau and early monsoon rains in the Red River Delta to produce a major disaster.

Up to a million acres of rice

land were flooded, and damage to crops, according to various estimates ranging from 10 per cent to 25 per cent of the total harvest, caused near-famine conditions in parts of the country.

Earlier this summer, Hanoi radio's broadcasts for home consumption began to exhort citizens to make good the repairs from last summer's floods so they would not be repeated this year.

But by mid-June, these exhortations became mingled with reports that the U.S. had begun a bombing campaign aimed at insuring there would be another flood.

State Department's rebuttal

As this accusation began to be echoed around the world, State Department officials sought to rebut the charge.

They pointed out that the dike system could easily have been damaged below the water's surface in last year's floods and warned that new floods from this cause very well might recur this summer.

At the same time, the administration backpedaled from earlier denials that any dikes at all were bombed.

Late last month, it issued a grudging admission that the primary dike system through mid-July had suffered some damage in 12 locations during

the course of bombing raids on "targets of military value."

A composite intelligence report released at the time by the State Department ended with this warning:

"North Vietnam must ... complete the repair of damage caused by the 1971 floods before next month when this year's rainy season will reach its peak."

It now appears that danger is past, officials say, unless there is a freak typhoon during September similar to the one that inundated parts of the Philippines earlier this month.

Recent Central Intelligence Agency weather estimates of the Himalaya and Yunnan Plateau runoff show that "this is a low water year as far as river flow is concerned," as one high government officer put it.

Studied French records

This official view of the situation received unofficial support yesterday from a critic of the war who has made a special study of weather and flood conditions in the Red River Delta as part of a monograph that is sharply critical of U.S. bombing policy.

John Gliedman, a young Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is at present a free-lance writer living in Cambridge, Mass.

He explained in a telephone interview that a study of weather records of Indochina kept by the French from 1885 to the outbreak of World War II shows that there never have been two successive years of serious flooding.

Mr. Gliedman also pointed out that a survey of Hanoi's reports of bombing damage since the raids resumed this spring shows a pattern of attacks that in themselves would not cause serious flooding of the delta even if the dike system were deliberately targeted.

Most of the bombing, he said, follows a pattern "similar to the Japanese."

Nixon "telling it right"

Dikes were hit then, during the gradual escalation of bombing by President Johnson from 1965 to 1968, but the bombing was concentrated mainly in coastal areas where flooding would be light and would damage crops rather than drown civilians.

While he is a critic of U.S. war policy, Mr. Gliedman said he had concluded from the evidence to date that "I don't think a policy decision has been made to take out the dikes. Nixon was telling it right on that point."

He pointed out, however, that U.S. bombing could still cause great damage to the autumn rice harvest by attacking the dike system in early November—"right after the election, to lessen the political impact."

He said raids of this sort could cause devastating food shortages with less danger of mass drowning of civilians than bombing during the summer flood season.

Mr. Gliedman said he had undertaken independent research of the Red River Delta's flood and weather conditions in preparation for a pamphlet, "Terror from the Skies," criticizing U.S. bombing policy.

The pamphlet was undertaken for the Vietnam Resource Center, an anti-war organization based in Cambridge.